New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Small Hours"

Daily Mirror

February 16, 1951

Kaufman Scores Again With 'The Small Hours'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

George S. Kaufman and Leueen MacGrath have penned an amusing and moving play in "The Small Hours," which Max Gordon brought to the National Theatre last evening. They have taken a somewhat familiar plot and created a script about it that holds the interest constantly. After all, there are only so many basic plots, and it's what you do with them that counts.

"The Small Hours" has to do with a family that falls apart because of material success. Henry Mitchell becomes a wealthy, powerful and sophisticated book publisher. His wife, who had encouraged him in the founding of the business, feels that he has outgrown her. Their children are spoiled and selfish.

But when serious trouble comes to the family, it is reunited. Its members rally to one another with sympathy and understanding. And the insecure Mrs. Mitchell is amazed to learn that her outwardly strong husband has had his moments of self doubts. It is when alone in the small hours that we often face our most difficult problems.

Kaufman has staged the new work beautifully. The cast is large and first rate. Dorothy Stickney and Paul McGrath act the Mitchells with fine feeling, telling effect and genuine warmth.

Joyce Lear, Michael Wager, Thomas Noyes, Joan Wetmore, Leona Maricle, Polly Rowles, Maurice Burke, Ruth Hammond and Donald McClelland are admirable in other roles. And salutes are due Donald Keyes, Richard Barbee, Bijou Fernandez, Jean Casto, John Marriott, Heywood Hale Broun, Kathleen Bolton, Wendell K. Phillips and Vera Fuller Mellish in small but important parts.

"THE SMALL HOURS"

Play by George S. Kaufman and Leueen MacGrath; staged by Mr. Kaufman; settings by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Alice Gibson; presented by Max Gordon at the National Theatre, February 15, 1951. The cast:

Laura Mitchell..Dorothy Stickney
Henry Mitchell...Paul McGrath
Martin.....Donald Keyes
Dorothy Mitchell....Joyce Lear
Peter Mitchell...Michael Wager
Carter Reynolds..Thomas Noyes
A Stranger.....Carl Judd
Candice Barrett..Joan Wetmore
Pippa Shields....Leona Maricle
Lucy McLean.....Polly Rowles
Philip Shields...Maurice Burke
Reed Armstrong..Paul Kirk Giles
John L. Barrett..Richard Barbee
A maid.....Vickie Marsden
Motorcycle officer.....
Joseph Hardy
A girl.....Ludie Claire
A waiter.....Ralph Longley
Alice.....Eileen Burns
Secretary.....Bijou Fernandez
Bessie Palmer.....Jean Casto
Police lieutenant..Ben Loughlin
Mrs. Reynolds..Ruth Hammond
Mr. Reynolds..Donald McClelland
The Great Chesterton.....
Haywood Hale Broun
Dunbar.....John Marriott
Eddie.....Oliver Grandi
Mrs. Carpenter..Kathleen Bolton
Doctor.....Wendell K. Phillips
Miss Murney.....
Vera Fuller Mellish

Synopsis: The play begins and ends in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, but frequently departs from it. There are two acts and twenty-six scenes.

After several trying evenings in the theatre recently, it is good to be able to relish playgoing again. We enjoyed "The Small Hours" immensely, and we think you will, too. It offers a keen insight into human nature. It has heart and wit. We recommend that you buy your tickets immediately, for they'll probably be hard to come by.

Incidentally, this has been quite a season for the Kaufmans. George has been represented, so far, by "Guys and Dolls," a revival of "The Royal Family" and the new arrival. Miss MacGrath (in private life Mrs. Kaufman) is co-starring in "The High Ground," which has been receiving excellent notices on the road during tune-ups and is due here shortly. Oh yes, and it's good to have Max Gordon back with us again, especially when he brings us such a stimulating hit as "The Small Hours."

DAILY NEWS

February 16, 1951

Miss Stickney Acts Brilliantly in 'Small Hours,' a Sentimental Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

George S. Kaufman and his wife, Leueen MacGrath, the authors; Donald Oenslager, the set designer; Max Gordon, the producer, and Kaufman again as the director have put a great deal into "The Small Hours," a comedy which opened last evening at the National Theatre.

It is a large portion of theatre and is generally satisfying. Some of its twenty-six scenes have the pith, brilliance and wry humor which have always marked Kaufman at his best. Other scenes are sentimental—so frankly sentimental and so pat that they seem almost to be daily chapters in a radio serial. Well, as somebody must have remarked, it takes all kinds of people to make an audience, and "The Small Hours" should appeal to them all.

The scenes I happened to enjoy most are the ones in which Kaufman is taking swift pokes at dinner-party conversation, the literary set, pretentiousness and other evidences of the frailty of the human intellect. When Mrs. Kaufman takes over the other department—the frailty of the human heart—she manages to create several moments of emotional warmth.

A Good, Big Company.

"The Small Hours" is the kind of play I have been asking for recently—a play in which there are a number of interesting people to whom interesting things happen. It has a big, well-chosen company—and it is lucky indeed to have Dorothy Stickney in the main role. Miss Stickney is a captivating actress, who can make you laugh at her one moment, laugh with her the next, and be sentimentally touched by her in the following instant. In the new play she has all kinds of opportunities and she never fails to make the most of them.

Miss Stickney portrays the sweet little wife of a wealthy publisher (Paul McGrath). Since their marriage and since the arrival and growth of their son and daughter, wife and husband have moved apart intellectually and emotionally. She thinks that he, with his grand life among celebrities, has moved beyond her, while she has remained a rather dumb stick-in-the-mud who can never make conversation at parties. She loses her husband, of course, to a predatory authoress—and, of course, she gets him back again.

An Amusing Lady Writer.

Among the people who move in and out of Mr. Oenslager's many handsome sets are the son and daughter, each with his own spiritual problems, and an array of amusing characters who range from a Florida tourist to a butler who is insufferable merely because he is a perfect butler.

The twenty-nine actors in "The Small Hours" are an engaging lot. In addition to Miss Stickney and Mr. McGrath, I'd offer special commendation to Polly Rowles for her playing of the lady author; to Donald Keyes as the butler; to Joyce Lear and Michael Wager as the daughter and son; to Joan Wetmore as a stylish decorator, and to Leona Maricle as an acidulous female. When you consider these days of inflation, this Kaufman-MacGrath-Gordon play offers a lot for the money. It opened "cold" last night, and I feel sure that Director Kaufman will soon trim and tighten it a bit.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
February 16, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

Fails to Tick

THE new play by George S. Kaufman and Leueen MacGrath considers various social and sexual neuroses in a continuity which sprawls over the twenty-six scenes of a complicated production. In particular, "The Small Hours" concerns itself with a nervous and mousy wife played by Dorothy Stickney, a misfit in her family and in the world, gradually redeemed by the knowledge that all people are sometimes lonely. Since Kaufman has had a hand in the writing and staging, there is a touch of good theater in each of the separate scenes of this show. At the same time, they do not fit together comfortably, nor is there any strong distillation of experience in this collection of episodes at the National.

* * *

Kaufman and Miss MacGrath, who is Mrs. Kaufman in private life, are plotting the course of a woman who married young and who believes in middle age that she is inadequate to the needs of her successful husband and her two grown-up children. There is more than a trace of familiar terror in her awkward behavior at a dinner party and in other little but important domestic crises. There is also a touch of nobility as, after hitting bottom, she climbs back to safety when she realizes that she is no worse off than anyone else. But the script is written like a novel in dialogue; if the authors need a scene in Florida, or in a taxi, or in jail, they put one in, as though they had no patience to compress their material or to draw characters except in a few swift strokes. Those who are deeply interested in such problems might be moved by this or that event in "The Small Hours," but on the whole it is random and artificial.

* * *

Miss Stickney does an admirably job of reflecting vague terrors off various facets of her personality, in a performance which is much stronger than the part. Nearly all of the numerous characters produce some reaction in her, but it is Paul McGrath as her condescending husband who is supposed to be the chief antagonist. It is unfortunate that the conflict between husband and wife is the weakest in the play, when it should be the strongest; not because of McGrath's acting, but because this element is cloudy in motivation and conventional in outline. The sketchiness of most of these people makes it difficult for anything important to come out of their relationships, and the strongest moments are those in which Miss Stickney projects feeling without dialogue but with the accuracy and charm of her characterization.

* * *

The supporting cast presents a collection of bold poses, completely in style with a show that spends no time dawdling over details. Among its more prominent members are Joyce Lear as a snobbish daughter, Michael Wager as an emotionally frustrated son, Thomas Noyes as a young scion of the horsey set, Joan Wetmore as a kindly woman of the chic world and Polly Rowles as a raw-voiced and predatory lady author. The scenery by Donald Oenslager is well adapted for action staged in three sections, two of them on turntables, and Kaufman's direction keeps things going smoothly through the various incidents. It is not the mere number of scenes and characters that robs "The Small Hours" of vitality. They simply do not contribute to each other, or pile up into anything especially significant, in a scattered and indecisive play.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun
February 16, 1951

29 Actors Parade In 'The Small Hours'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Drama
Topic—Marriage
I find it—Shallow

Not even its 26 scenes and 29 actors can keep "The Small Hours" from being much more than a soap opera, related with choppy technique.

The principal characters are pleasant enough and their problems are familiar. The play disappoints in its refusal to elaborate on the people enough to make them interesting, and its failure to explore situations.

No dramatist ever believes that a successful businessman can have a contented home life. This time a publisher has a timid, purposeless wife. His daughter is a terrifying picture of cold blooded efficiency, and his son is a maladjusted neurotic.

The wife has no family function left for her. She is too unsophisticated to keep up with her husband's callous business associates.

Suddenly she feels wanted again, when her son is arrested for taking dope, and she can work on some unidentified prison committee.

But just as she and her husband agree on a divorce, chiefly because of his affair with a successful lady author, the wife becomes psychically paralyzed.

This seems to snap each one of the others into facing his own faults. If the ending does not promise great success for everybody, it certainly makes them look toward a happier future.

Lots of Possibilities.

All this ought to be dramatically interesting. Certainly the problem of the woman whose children have grown up has plenty of possibilities. But the play is written with a dogged, hop-skip-and-jump technique that never gives any real texture to the characters or the events.

The short scenes tumble over one another so fast that the audience is barely used to one before it is blacked out.

There is, for instance, a situation in which a charming decorator offers the wife the only warmth her worldly associates have held out to her. The sequence has a moral, but does not advance the story or reveal any new depths to the personalities.

Another interlude between the wife and her young son, comes to the edge of great warmth, then chops off at a shocking revelation which should have vastly illuminated the two people.

This method of short sequences can be smooth on celluloid. Alive, it is precarious and prevents momentum.

The constant blacking out makes many of the laughs sound like revue sketch gags. This is a pity, because there is some highly amusing humor through the play.

Woman of No Charm.

Dorothy Stickney is entirely delightful in the earlier sequences, portraying a pleasant little woman of no particular taste or charm, trying to keep up with a slick, hard-boiled crowd. As the play goes on, she is faced with the problem of making confetti sound like a printed page. The mere fact that she does not turn grim with the effort is valiant. Instead she plays with simple radiance that is remarkably winning.

Paul McGrath hits just the necessary urbane key for the husband. Though he never shows too much what he thinks or feels, this man is essentially understanding.

Michael Wager is quiet and real as the neurotic son. Of the family friends, I found most interesting Joan Wetmore as a charming decorator, Polly Rowles as the author, and Jean Casto as a resurrected friend from the old days.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
February 16, 1951

Unhappy Lot of a Publisher's Wife

By Richard Watts Jr.

George S. Kaufman and Leueen MacGrath have written a play about life among the book-publishing intellectuals, but the drama, I'm afraid, has rather the quality of slick-paper magazine fiction. It is called "The Small Hours," and, at the National last night, where it had its first performance, there was an unfortunately hollow ring to it, despite Mr. Kaufman's expert direction, Donald Oenslager's fine sets, an occasional touch of good satirical observation, and attractive performances by Dorothy Stickney and an expert cast.

I don't know a great deal about daytime radio serials, but I have the unhappy impression that "The Small Hours," despite its smooth competence, suggests one of them too closely for comfort. There is the kind of slick glibness about it that makes the narrative move along pleasantly and painlessly enough, but keeps it from ever seeming anything more than superficially agreeable. For all the theatrical knowledge that has gone into it, the new play is strangely lacking in genuine dramatic power and credibility.

Publisher's Wife

"The Small Hours" is the story of the shy and uncomfortable wife of a successful publisher. She is convinced that she is no longer a proper mate for her prosperous husband, and, when she accompanies him to dinner with his literary friends, she is tongue-tied, embarrassed and given to knocking over valuable articles of art. Furthermore, her daughter has turned out to be a cold and shallow young woman who has contempt for her mother, and the son, who has developed homosexual tendencies, goes to jail for smoking marijuana.

It might here be remarked parenthetically that, while the wife doesn't seem quite the brightest woman imaginable, her attitude toward her husband's cultured friends is most understandable. They compose as stuffy and unpleasant a social set as you could hope to avoid, and they are contemplated with much of Mr. Kaufman's gift for pilloryings human insects. But satire is not the major aim of "The Small Hours." Its concern is rather with the sorrows of the unhappy lady, whose morbid state causes her to lose the use of her legs.

Lady Writer

It is my guess that things might have been more entertaining if Mr. Kaufman and Miss MacGrath had devoted more of their attention to their contemptuous study of the arrogant lady writer, who alternately insults and makes love to the publisher, and to other examples of the vermin of the literary set. Instead, they occupy most of the evening with a rather tearful account of the wife's sorrows, which are certainly numerous. Finally, she recovers the use of her limbs and routs her enemies, but it all seemed oddly mechanical.

Miss Stickney, always a skillful actress, plays engagingly as the wife, but she is hardly able to avoid seeming like a lachrymose radio heroine. There are competent performances by Paul McGrath as the husband, Polly Rowles as the unpleasant authoress, and Joyce Lear as the handsome and coldly selfish daughter, but it seemed to me that the most interesting playing in the supporting cast was contributed by Joan Wetmore, who gave remarkable warmth and delicacy to the small role of a successful decorator who sympathizes with the wife's plight. But "The Small Hours" rarely comes to proper dramatic life

Journal American
February 16, 1951

Contrived Plot Ruins Some Fine Moments

By JOHN McCLAIN

"The Small Hours," a new play by George S. Kaufman and Leueen MacGrath, which was presented at the National Theatre last night by Max Gordon concerns a mother's conflict with insecurity.

The basic idea is as old as the Greeks, and therefore very sound and workable, but I don't think this version will be among the most memorable.

Here we have the wife of a successful publisher, complete with grown son and daughter, suddenly confronted by a series of problems emanating from her helplessness.

She is a social failure in and out of her home, she has pampered her son into becoming a secret marijuana addict, she almost louses up her daughter's marriage and does, in fact, propell her husband temporarily into the arms of a lady author.

There seems to be almost no hope for anybody when an unexpected friend comes out of left field and says. "You are no different from anybody else—everybody is lonely."

• • •

Regeneration

This, seemingly, does the trick. From there onward she has confidence and authority and pretty soon her whole family is relying on her, so that before you can say Donald Oenslager, who did a magnificent job with the sets, each member has solved his own problem and is happily proceeding into the future.

In this pleasant progression several points bothered me. Why is the mother so singularly inadequate at such a late date?

True, they have risen to wealth the hard way but it must have been gradual and I cannot believe anybody but a sheer dope would be so suddenly terrified and ineffectual in the company of her new friends. Such a dope could not as rapidly regenerate in the last act.

The son gets nailed for smoking reefers in the first act and does a short bit in the stir. When he gets out he comes home and starts writing a book, but right in the middle of reading it to Mummy he stops and explains that added to everything else he is a latent homosexual. I thought they had enough troubles without that!

The entire plot structure, in fact impressed me as being highly contrived during many such convenient moments. It is doubtless a medical fact, but I found it hard to believe that Mums would lose the use of her legs because of a mental block just when it would do the most good.

• • •

Despite this there is much of the fine Kaufman humor and, amongst the 26 scenes, a great many wonderfully constructed vignettes which make you wish they were part of a more compelling whole.

Dorothy Stickney and Paul McGrath are great as Ma and Pa, and I particularly liked the performances of Joyce Lear and Michael Wager as the daughter and son, Joan Wetmore, Leona Maricle, Jean Casto, Heywood Hale Broun, Thomas Noyes, and, particularly, Polly Rowles, in their supporting roles.

There is so much sparkle in this play, so much promise that it may any moment ignite and light up the sky. Which makes it all the more regrettable to report that somewhere along the line the fuse blew out.

The New York Times

February 16, 1951

'The Small Hours,' Written by Mr. and Mrs. G. S. Kaufman, Put On at the National

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In "The Small Hours" the talk is also small, and the ideas are not gigantic. Towards the end of the play, which opened at the National last evening, you realize that George S. Kaufman and Leueen MacGrath are making a definite point. They are saying that even the grandees of modern life are scared and lonely and are looking around for support. Nearly every character except the weakest one in their portrait of smart New York life goes to pieces.

This may be a shrewd analysis of New York's tycoons in the book and magazine trade and of their gold-plated women folk as well. But it seems platitudinous by the time Mr. and Mrs. Kaufman get around to it. For the first half of a torpid evening is devoted to a piecemeal description of the seamy side of our local glamour—snobbery at the dinner table, business buccaneering, l'amour with a female novelist, marihuana smoking among the younger set and other ordinary abominations of brilliant society.

* * *

Written like a motion-picture, "The Small Hours" consists of twenty-six scenes. The authors hardly get to work on a scene before the writing stops and the scenery begins to move. Donald Oenslager has designed fine settings that shine with the relaxed luxury of his most comforting work. He can switch you from a publisher's private house to the opulent dining-room of a rival publisher's house, show you the interiors of private cars and take a quick look at Florida with the greatest of ease and expense. Everything works with mechanical perfection and in splendid taste.

But isn't a production like this a substitute for writing? Hasn't the real core of drama been left out of the play? "The Small Hours" is less like theatre than magazine fiction or motion-picture writing.

Mr. Kaufman has cast it with a flair for picturesque types. Although the pace of the performance is enervating, the staging is flawless. Dorothy Stickney plays the part of the publisher's wife who finds herself inferior to her husband's intellectual and social station through most of the play. Miss Stickney is a superb actress who should be drawn through the park in an elaborate carriage by worshipful college boys. But in view of her long triumph over Father Day in "Life With Father," your correspondent was never able to regard her as stupider than the other characters in "The Small Hours," no matter how outrageously they patronized her.

* * *

Paul McGrath gives an accomplished performance as the suave publisher who is gentlemanly with his wife and terrific with his female author. In order to cover insecurity among the upper classes, the authors require the services of a lot of actors, all of them without exception being persuasive in their parts. The best of them are Michael Wager, who plays a melancholy youth with real tenderness, and Polly Rowles, who plays the woman writer with terrifying force of character.

Everything, including Alice Gibson's brilliant costumes, is well planned and executed. But the writing is not worth the trouble. Mr. and Mrs. Kaufman do not get very far under the surface of their theme.

"Iolanthe"

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

February 16, 1951

Another D'Oyly Carte Revival at the St. James

By Bert McCord

An unwitting theatergoer chancing to see Thursday night's offering at the St. James would react much in the same fashion as his more sophisticated counterpart did after watching "Guys and Dolls" earlier in the season. For "Iolanthe," which is one of the happiest collaborations of Gilbert and Sullivan, is quite as fresh and refreshing today as when it was first presented in 1882. And the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company is at its finest in interpreting this melodious satire.

A requisite of effective satire is superiority, in the sense that whatever is being satirized must never seem as good as the satire itself. This quality is beautifully in evidence in the witty Gilbert lyrics and the equally witty and also melodious Sullivan score. And the company keeps up the pace with an interpretation brimming with confidence and style.

All of the players are excellent, with Martyn Green heading the list as usual in the role of the "highly susceptible" Lord Chancellor, which provides him with the opportunity for an impeccable rendition of the famed Insomnia Song. Ella Halman is one of the most imposing fairy queens ever to have been taught how to "curl myself inside a buttercup." Richard Watson is stately and wryly humorous as Private Willis, of the Grenadier guards. Margaret Mitchell is both fascinating and convincing as the shepherdess wooed by two earls, the chancellor and Strephon, effectively played by Alan Styler. Eric Thornton and Leonard Osborn could not be improved on as the two peers who were once boys together. Altogether, it was an inspired evening.

DAILY NEWS

February 16, 1951

D'Oyly Carte in A Fine 'Iolanthe'

What is there to say about "Iolanthe" except that it is probably the loveliest of all the Gilbert and Sullivan works and that the inimitable D'Oyly Carte Opera Co., getting around to it last night at the St. James, gave it an enchanting performance?

Martyn Green was in perfect form as the Lord Chancellor and the Messrs. Eric Thornton and Leonard Osborn were excellent embodiments of two fatuous young peers. Ella Halman's imperious fairy queen, Alan Styler's nicely modulated Strephon, Joan Gillingham's appealing Iolanthe, Margaret Mitchell's wonderfully arch Phyllis and Richard Watson's thoughtful and sturdy Private Willis were all distinct and enjoyable performances.

Everything was as fine as could be and the packed house was obviously delighted. —Watt.

"IOLANTHE"

Operetta by W. S. Gilbert, with music by Arthur Sullivan; presented by the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company at the St. James Theatre, February 15, 1951. The cast:

The Lord Chancellor.....Martyn Green
Earl of Mountararat.....Eric Thornton
Earl Tolloller..Leonard Osborn
Private Willis..Richard Watson
Strephon.....Alan Styler
Queen of the Fairies..Ella Halman
Iolanthe.....Joan Gillingham
Celia.....Enid Walsh
Lelia.....Joyce Wright
Fleta.....Henrietta Steytler
Phyllis.....Margaret Mitchell

The New York Times

February 16, 1951

'Iolanthe' Is Fourth in Savoyard Bill

The ladies and gentlemen of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company offered "Iolanthe" last night at the St. James Theatre. It is the fourth bill in the troupe's repertory, and, at this stage, it probably will not come as a surprise to anyone to learn that England's well-known verse singers are still in top form. They continue to sing effectively, with color, authority and feeling. It was obvious from last night's large group of loyal Savoyards, that they could do no wrong.

Produced in London as far back as 1882, "Iolanthe" contains some of Composer Sullivan's most captivating musical numbers. They are at once charming, sweet of tone and brisk. The March of Peers song, for instance, still remains a rousing merry number full of quick, rhythmic movement. To match all this Mr. Gilbert has written some droll lyrics, digging, rather affectionately, however, at the pretense and snobbishness of yesteryear's peerdom.

As the Lord Chancellor, uncontrollably susceptible to young feminine charms, Martyn Green is probably at the top of his bent. His humor is dry, crisp and sly as the pompous aristocrat who wants the ward for himself. His tongue-in-cheek delivery of the Bar song provides one of the evening's amusing moments.

Allan Styler, a comparative newcomer to the company is the possessor of a fine baritone voice in the role of Strephon, a half mortal, half fairy Arcadian shepherd in love with the ward. He is properly ardent and emotional in the pursuit of his lady fair.

Margaret Mitchell is a pleasant soprano in the part of Phyllis, the Arcadian shepherdess and ward in chancery, singing with tenderness and warmth. Joan Gillingham makes an attractive Iolanthe, Strephon's fairy mother, who incurs the disfavor of the fairy land authorities for marrying a mere mortal. And, Ella Haiman makes a formidable Queen of the Fairies who is not as wicked as she appears.

Isidore Godfrey conducts meticulously with an obvious affection for the tuneful score. Norman Wilkinson has provided some colorful costumes. Especially regal are those of the Peers, who sing the Blue Blood song humorously and with an expert comic touch. "Iolanthe" will be repeated this evening and twice tomorrow. L. C.

New York Post
HOME NEWS

February 16, 1951

Too Short a Stay for 'Iolanthe'

By Vernon Rice

Chancing that I shall not have my membership card to the Loyal Followers of Gilbert and Sullivan snatched from me today, and hoping that I won't be cut dead by faithful Savoyards, I shall come right out and say that "Iolanthe" is not now, never has been, nor ever will be my favorite work of the Victorian collaborators.

I have a favorite. It's "The Gondoliers." Having seen the two operettas in succession, my devotion to it is more firm than ever, even in the midst of angry cries and surly snarls from the "Iolanthe" lovers.

I am aware that in "The Gondoliers" Sullivan triumphs over Gilbert and that the composer was imitating Italian writers of his day. I know that in "Iolanthe" the two men reached the height of their labors, but, forgive me, Dick Watts, it's still "The Gondoliers" for me.

With that confession out of the way, I shall proceed to the business of reporting on the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company's "Iolanthe," which opened last night at the St. James, to be presented through tomorrow evening only.

The British troupe was in its expected fine form.

Martyn Green, as usual, took over the show, playing the Lord Chancellor.

There Were Others, Too

Margaret Mitchell made a fetching Phyllis, loved by Strephon, mortal only from the waist down. In that role was newcomer Alan Styler, continuing the good work he's been doing during the short season.

As the queen of the fairies, Ella Halman rolled her rich, full contralto voice around, and among the others not to be overlooked were Richard Watson as Private Willis, Eric Thornton playing the part of Earl of Mountararat, Leonard Osborn enacting Earl Tolloller and Joan Gillingham in the title role.

Immense pleasure is to be gained from this production of "Iolanthe." See it, if you can. Last night there was standing-room-only.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 16, 1951

Peers Romp With Pixies In 'Iolanthe'

By LOUIS BIANCOLLI

Another Gilbert and Sullivan fantasy of verbal and melodic magic breezed across the stage of the St. James Theater last night. This time it was "Iolanthe," for my money the pearl of the D'Oyly Carte Opera jewel casket.

Like the operetta itself, the performance was pure enchantment. The company plunged into the spirit of the thing as if they were on a holiday—and the holiday mood radiated out to the large crowd that applauded as if "Iolanthe" were a new-born masterpiece.

I happen to rank "Iolanthe" with "The Mikado" and "Pinafore" as the peak accomplishments of the greatest theatrical team in history. There are moments where the wedding of word and music rises to the heights of superlative grand opera.

Refined Buffoonery.

The best of it is refined buffoonery of the highest order. As all good Savoyards know, "Trial by Jury" was Gilbert and Sullivan's amiable lampoon at the English court system. In "Iolanthe" the boys took the House of Lords apart, poking a few jabs at all privileged pretense in the process.

If Gilbert managed to bring together lord chancellors and Arcadian shepherds and pixies without making the melange downright silly, Sullivan for his part was able to follow him along a line of musical inspiration that gave the whole mad scramble a logic of its own.

The charm of last night's performance was that everybody acted and sang as if such things could be. Even more than in other Savoyard works, the drollery stemmed from the solemn gravity with which the sheerest nonsense was propounded.

Profound Nonsense.

Not a single member of the cast, from leading character to chorister, ever betrayed by so much as a smile or intonation of voice that Gilbert's rolling absurdities were anything but the profoundest wisdom.

The swift chatter rippled along, with the chorus echoing last phrases as if they enshrined eternal solemnities; the lords paraded before the band of wand-waving sprites as if this was everyday behavior for their bewigged lordships.

And through it all the company gave Sullivan's music all its due of sprightly delicacy. Like Gilbert's voluble patter, it ran on and on like a bubbling spring, as fresh as the first day it spouted on the stage of the newly built Savoy Theater. And that was some time ago.

"Not for Children"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 14, 1951

'Not for Children' Opens at Coronet With Betty Field and Elliott Nugent

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Unclassifiable.
Topic—Theater.
Purpose—Obscure.
I find it—Back breaking.

As an eminent man of the theater, Elmer Rice has done his calling little service in "Not for Children." It is a formless charade of cloudy aims, without a single resolved or fulfilled notion.

The plan of presentation is informal with a confusing vengeance. The "producer" starts apologizing before the curtain rises. He explains that he will have the "play" reviewed before it begins, by a man who has never seen it. This man has an easy job.

The producer then introduces and installs outside the curtain in easy chairs a lady lecturer and a college professor, who are to comment on the play. They are intellectually at swords' points, but amorously sympathetic.

One-Hour Argument.

For the first hour they argue about the play, which unfolds erratically behind them. Then they argue about whether they are themselves or actors playing themselves. Finally they become

"NOT FOR CHILDREN"

Comedy by Elmer Rice; staged by Mr. Rice; settings by John Root; costumes by Main Bocher; music by Robert Emmet Dolan; presented by the Playwright's Company at the Coronet Theatre, February 13, 1951. The cast:

Elijah Silverhammer.....Keene Crockett
Clarence Orth..Alexander Clark
Timothy Forrest.....J. Edward Bromberg
Ambrose Atwater..Elliott Nugent
Theodora Effington..Betty Field
Irma Orth.....Natalie Core
Prudence Dearborn..Ann Thomas
Evangeline Orth..Joan Copeland
Digby Walsh.....Phil Arthur
Hugh McHugh.....Fredd Wayne
Hitch Imborg.....John Gerstad
An Old Gentleman...Gar Moore
Pensacola Crawford.....Frances Tannehill
Pianist.....Bud Gregg

part of the play.

Early in the evening one character calls for a pause "while gentlemen of the press scribble Pirandello on their programs." No self-respecting reporter could originate a link between the brilliant Italian playwright and "Not for Children."

It is very hard to tell just what Mr. Rice had in mind when writing this work. If the people had any depth, if the play had any humor, or if the arguments were interesting or even ever pursued to a finish, the formlessness would be unimportant.

Phony Violence.

But the play within the play is arbitrarily shapeless. It is occasionally funny in a shocking way, when phony violence relieves the constant chatter.

Imagine a revue sketch, overwritten and overlong with plenty of props, lots of quick changing, shallow scenery, and completely one-dimensional characters. Imagine further, sitting and waiting two and a quarter hours for the blackout, and you will have a rough idea of what "Not for Children" is like.

Betty Field plays the lecturer, with a certain amount of polish and glamor. She makes the woman a dame who knows she is so slick on the eyes that it does not matter whether or not she talks pure baldedash.

Boyish Pouting.

Elliott Nugent is not quite so guileless. He sounds, reasonably enough, as if his lines are difficult to remember. In a desperate effort to characterize the professor he is reduced to boyish pouting and rolling of eyes.

J. Edward Bromberg is the producer, and works very hard but rather as if he expected a minimum of results. Nobody else has much chance to score except Ann Thomas, who is particularly funny as a gangster's moll.

Journal American

February 14, 1951

New Elmer Rice Play Not for Adults, Either

By JOHN McCLAIN

Elmer Rice, by now an adult, has written something called "Not For Children" which was presented at the Coronet Theatre last night and despite the efforts of Elliott Nugent, Betty Field, J. Edward Bromberg, Ann Thomas and the rest of the competent cast I found it confused and adolescent.

Like any skilled artisan, Mr. Rice is incapable of giving anybody an entirely unrewarding evening. There are good words and provocative thoughts and a laugh here and there, but why he should have chosen to clutter it all up within the limits of such an unwieldly structure is beyond my ken.

It's as if somebody's kid, age eight, took his younger sister out to the barn and said: "We'll give a show, see? I'll tell all about it first and then we'll act out the show and I'll be the critic, too, and in the end we'll get married. What's more we'll charge everybody two pins to get in."

As a matter of fact, it isn't even that simple. First of all Mr. Bromberg comes out and explains that he is the producer and he's going to present a new play. Not only that but he's going to have Mr. Nugent, a professor, and Miss Field, a lecturer, sit on the sidelines and discuss it as it unfolds. This indeed they do, with Mr. Nugent taking the position of the bleak and practical human psychologist and Miss Field regarding it all as pardonable make-believe.

I think something might have been constructed from this premise, but the first thing you know they are both in a show-within-a-show, relinquishing their seats on either side of the stage and taking over the central action.

All this while the original plot, something involving a critic (Alex Clark) and his wife, Natalie Core, and their daughter, Joan Copeland, is being sustained at incomprehensible intervals. There is even a maid, played by Miss Thomas, who bobs up every now and then and sings a song.

* * *

Courageous Attempt

The whole proceedings get so garbled at one point that Mr. Bromberg comes out and tries to make a public explanation. He got as far as saying that this was a "show-within-a-show-within-a-show" when I personally stopped trying to go along with it.

I think that if an author has so completely confused everybody that he has to have a character come out and try to make sense of his plot he might have reexamined the events leading up to the hiatus and done some rewriting.

Mr. Nugent and Miss Field courageously attempt to bring off the long actionless moments of dialogue, delivered back and forth across an empty stage. They even succeed in bringing some emotion to a scene in which they deliver a eulogy to "The Bed."

That's what's on the stage—a double bed, fully lit and with nothing in it. They are together, far left, saying something like, "Yes, sir, there is nothing like a bed. That's where you're born . . . etc . . . etc . . . and that's where you wind up." It is a great tribute to their abilities that the house remained silent throughout.

There is, of course, a great temptation to say "Not For Children" is not for anybody. But on second thought I think it would be more accurate to say maybe it IS for children—if at all.

DAILY NEWS

February 14, 1951

'Not for Children' Is the Greatest Theatrical Curiosity Since Jo-Jo

By JOHN CHAPMAN

As if the smoke nuisance, Costelloism, basketball fixing, street excavations and the operation of garbage trucks before 8 A. M. were not enough, this muddled metropolis is now faced with the problem of why in in the what Ring Lardner used to call he—ll the Playwrights' Company produced "Not for Children" at the Coronet Theatre last evening.

Or why in the (same word) Elmer Rice wrote it, or Betty Field, Elliott Nugent and 10 other actors acted in it.

I have great respect for Mr. Rice as a man of the theatre. His intellect and integrity are unquestioned by me, and he has given me many memorable hours of playgoing. I regard the Playwrights' Company with the utmost admiration. Miss Field has always been a favorite actress, and Mr. Nugent, up to now, a favorite comedian. But I will be dadblasted if I can figure out what they were up to last night.

Maybe "Not for Children" is a whimsey. Perhaps it is a satire. Could be, even, that it is profound and provocative. But if it is any one of these things you had just better give me up as a drama critic, for the play floored me. It is an informal affair in which Mr. Nugent and Miss Field, as a pair of lecturers seated on the sides of the stage, talk about a play and occasionally take part in it.

Whom Is Kidding Who!

I got a stiff neck listening to Nugent and Field, what with swiveling my head like a spectator at a tennis match. Every once in a while the curtain would part between them and something would happen on the stage. I have a hazy idea that what happened on the stage involved the manufacture of a theatrical production, for characters included a playwright, some actors, a producer, the producer's mistress and a critic. But I think Mr. Rice's idea was hazier than my own. He may have wanted to deal whimsically or ironically with the theatre and its foolish problems, but if this was his purpose he sure laid an egg. And if he, the Playwrights and all the actors were merely trying to pull my leg they didn't succeed, because I was able to walk back here to the office afterward. Barely.

Anyhow, "Not for Children" will live in my memory, along with such golden moments as when I saw President William Howard Taft in City Park, Denver, Colo., and Fannie Brice and Billy Rose getting married at City Hall and Prime Minister Edouard Herriot shooting a pheasant at Rambouillet. If you want "Not for Children" to live in your memory, too, hurry to the Coronet Theatre. Better take a cab and tell the driver to step on it.

"Not for Children"—*continued*

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
February 14, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

Full of Nots!

ELMER RICE'S "Not for Children" is a baffling piece of theatrical hocus-pocus, and the bafflement is a source more of frustration than of wonder. In it the author employs three sets of characters tangled together in plays within plays in an attempt to reach a fourth surrealistic dimension of satire. His subject is the theater itself; his manner is arch; his language is flowery and discursive, and his construction almost defies explanation. It is as though Rice were plucking flowers at random from a mixed garden in the hope that the different colors would eventually blend into an effect. Even with Betty Field and Elliott Nugent to interpret the business as a pair of interlocutors, no such desirable result as a controlled effect comes across the footlights at the Coronet.

* * *

The way it all works is this: a "play" is about to be presented, and the "manager" comes through an inner curtain to announce that a psychology professor and a lady lecturer will spend the evening at the corners of the apron, explaining things as they progress. After the entrance of these two end-men, and a discussion between them on the theoretical meaning of the stage, the "play" begins to tell something about the home life of an actress, a critic and their daughter. Eventually the interlocutors, the play characters, and, in dressing-room scenes, the actors playing all the characters begin to merge with one another across the inner curtain. Perhaps Rice, in the early words of his "professor," is trying to "create the illusion of creating no illusion" with this tricky complex. If so, he is wholly successful; there is no illusion, and almost nothing but a few moments of platform wit or vague burlesque in "Not for Children."

* * *

Much of the verbal sparring between Nugent and Miss Field takes place across the width of the stage in a tennis-match situation, but they lounge toward each other on occasions to compete at close quarters or discuss the audience. Miss Field's cool, particular speech makes her words sound soothing, and Nugent slouches into a portrait of an amiable and tweedy intellectual. The dialogue, which includes several references to Rice himself, is less than vital in its long analyses of the theater and less than sparkling in the skits about gangsterism, show-producing or love. Including even a eulogy to a bed, with a bed present at stage center, this play is an attempt at tour de force. Missing, it misses very widely and very definitely.

* * *

The author staged his own play through its various convolutions, and it is difficult to see how he could have done much more with it than is contained already in this assortment of gunfire, stagehands' "mistakes," dressing room follies and other bold pursuits. J. Edward Bromberg, Alexander Clark, Natalie Core, Joan Copeland, Fredd Wayne and John Gerstad are among those who play single, double or triple roles in support of the stars. Included among the trappings are gowns by Mainbocher, sets by John Root and a pair of songs, in one of which "unit" is rhymed with "ruin it." Rice has made a good deal of magic in the theater, but there is little trace of it in "Not for Children."

The New York Times
February 14, 1951

Betty Field and Elliott Nugent Play Leading Parts in Elmer Rice's 'Not for Children'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Elmer Rice has written twenty-five other plays, his reputation does not depend on "Not For Children," which opened at the Coronet last evening. That is a fortunate thing for him and for the theatre in general. For there is no way of evading the dismal fact that "Nor For Children" is certainly not for adults, nor for fish, flesh, fowl nor good red herring.

Mr. Rice has one of the keenest minds in the theatre. He is also an able craftsman. In "Not For Children," which was originally written in 1934, he seems to be cutting a whimsical caper by throwing away his craftsmanship and checking his mind in the cloak room.

* * *

In an interview he gave to Maurice Zolotow for this newspaper recently Mr. Rice said he could not say what the theme of "Not For Children" is. At the time that seemed like author's guile on the verge of a Broadway opening. But now that his prank has taken place in public, it is obvious that, as usual, he was being candid. If he doesn't know what his play is about, no one need expect any help from this column. It is about two hours long: that is the only fact that is absolutely certain.

On opposite ends of the stage sit two lecturers—Elliott Nugent, a professor who does not like the theatre, and Betty Field, a lecturer who does. They are supposed to comment on a play that J. Edward Bromberg is producing. After a preliminary discussion, which is not remarkable for its brilliance, "Not For Children" alternates dramatic scenes on the stage with comments by the lecturers. It also includes a satiric song or two and a number of unrelated lampoons of the theatre.

Some times such improvisations "come off," as the phrase goes. Sometimes everything falls neatly into place, the gibes strike home, the discussions seem droll or witty and everyone has a refreshing good time. There are a few bits of amusing satire of the theatre in "Not For Children." But most of it is ponderous and unwieldy. What is intended to be funny seems banal. In view of Mr. Rice's known abilities, one can only suppose that the wild disorders written in good faith in 1934 are the aimless bores of 1951. Perhaps the public mind has lost contact with the spirit of seventeen years ago.

* * *

In unhappy circumstances like these, a theatergoer can develop a tremendous passion for the actors. They seem so composed, skillful, rational, witty and beautiful. How gorgeous Miss Field is in stunning gowns by Main Bocher, and how cool and elegant! What a humorist Mr. Nugent is, and how bountifully Mr. Bromberg presides over the ceremonies!

As a hard-voiced, scowling female brat, Ann Thomas actually makes some impression on the evening by being herself. All the actors deserve citations for professionalism beyond the call of duty; and John Root deserves a vote of thanks for setting the stage so handsomely.

Unfortunately, "Not For Children" is not Mr. Rice's dish of tea. He does better with the heavier victuals.

Daily Mirror
February 14, 1951

'Not for Children' Satire On Theatre's Faults

By ROBERT COLEMAN

At his best, Elmer Rice is a first-rate dramatist. Therefore, "Not for Children," a satiric novelty which the Playwrights' Company brought to the Coronet Theatre last evening, has some interesting and literate moments. But they are lost in a complex and confusing background of stage trickery.

As the curtain rises, a theatrical manager about to present a play announces that he has engaged a couple of highbrow lecturers to explain it to the audience. Or, in Rice's own words, "A couple of end men to pull Chatauqua gags." Only one of them is a woman.

They proceed to expound Rice's philosophy of the theatre, and their discussions are illustrated via a number of blackouts and vaudeville skits. There are tongue-in-cheek pokes at playwrights, producers, actors, critics, backers and audiences. There are learned and sometimes trenchant references to everyone from Aristotle and Plato to Brander Matthews and Elmer Rice.

When the shooting is all over, it is easy to fathom that Rice loathes a lot of things about the theatre, and yet loves it as an institution with all his heart. In the last scene, his will is read, wherein he leaves his "millions" to found an idealistic repertory company in which all the ills of the current entertainment world will be obliterated.

Betty Field, looking quite radiant in Main Bocher creations, and Elliott Nugent, in tweeds by an unprogrammed tailor, are delightful as the contrasting lecturers. J. Edward Bromberg gives one of his top performances as the bewildered and harassed manager. And salutes also are due Alexander Clark, Natalie Core, Ann Thomas, Joan Copeland, Frances Tannehill, Fredd Wayne and Phil Arthur in other roles.

John Root has designed stylish settings. Robert Emmett Dolan has composed the music for several burlesque songs. And the author has directed the muddled charade skillfully.

"Not for Children," as Rice points out, took its form from Pirandello. It is such a romp as the metaphysical Italian might have penned, could he have been as jocular at his own and others' expense as Elmer Rice. We enjoyed about a third of it immensely. But, as the playwright says during the proceedings: "There's such a thing as carrying a joke a little too far."

Even an intelligent joke can become a bore when stretched too thin.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
February 14, 1951

Elmer Rice Looks at the Theater

By Richard Watts Jr.

Elmer Rice is a versatile, intelligent and experienced man of the theater, and it should have been a lot of fun watching him in a playful mood, deriding the follies and eccentricities of his favorite art form. In his "Not for Children," which opened at the Coronet last night, he is to be found wielding his slapstick on playwrights, actors, critics, producers and audiences with equal abandon, but I'm afraid that the only real victim of his comic assault is Mr. Rice himself. For he has written a satire without revealing any trace of satirical sense.

To a certain extent, the author has disarmed his critics by criticizing his own play as he goes along. Elmer Rice is discussed quite frequently during the course of "Not for Children," and the dramatist has spared no pains in mocking himself and his comedy. I realize that it is quite sporting of him, but the trouble is that whatever fun might have been derived from this sportsmanship is destroyed through the sad fact that the self-criticisms prove to be entirely justified. The play is just as bad as he laughingly admits.

Wheels Within Wheels

"Not for Children" is written in the form of a play within a play. Indeed, it goes a little farther than that and emerges as a play within a play within a play. Anyway, Betty Field and Elliott Nugent appear as two commentators upon the work in progress, and they turn out to be actors in the piece they are commenting on, after which, if you will stay with me for a moment, they are seen as players in a melodrama written by one of the actors in the play within a play. Don't blame me if this seems slightly hard to follow. It is so complex a device that Mr. Rice devotes a great part of his second act to kidding it.

Now that I have got that out of the way, I must say that there are at least two major faults in "Not For Children," both of them pretty serious. In the first place, the author has written a comedy that contains hardly any comic lines or comic situations. A playful, satirical commentary on the theater, if it is to be effective, demands wit, sharpness, freshness and a sense of fun, and there is surprisingly little of the necessary qualities in what Mr. Rice has written. Most of it is unhappily leaden-footed.

Dated Satire

The second grave fault is the archaic lack of timeliness in the satirical thrusts. Heaven knows, there are plenty of things in the theater to make fun of, but at least it must be said for the stage that it doesn't go in for the gangster dramas, the hand-through-the-wall mystery melodramas and the fear of producing tragedies that "Not For Children" mocks. The theater Mr. Rice laughs at went out twenty years ago. It is true that the work was written some time ago, but the author might have tried to bring it comparatively up to date.

One of the many unfortunate things about the play is that it neglects so much good acting talent. Betty Field, as everyone knows, is one of the finest of contemporary actresses, but she is wasted as the female commentator. Mr. Nugent, another first-rate player, is equally unhappy as the male spokesman, and the expert J. Edward Bromberg works valiantly to little avail as the producer. The same must be said for Joan Copeland, Ann Thomas, Alexander Clark and the rest of them. It all seems a great pity.

"The Gondoliers"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
February 13, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

Triumph of Sir Arthur Sullivan

The purely academic argument as to whether Gilbert or Sullivan was more important to the everlasting fame of their collaboration is never likely to be settled, but there can be little doubt that Sir Arthur Sullivan is the man chiefly responsible for the wonders of "The Gondoliers," which the D'Oyly Carte Company got around to offering at the St. James last night. The book and lyrics, good as they are, may not by any means represent Gilbert at his peak, but the score is certainly one of the most delightful ever conceived by a composer.

The flow of enchanting songs, especially in the second act, is continuous, and last night's audience sensibly gave every sign of having the time of its life. The visiting Savoyards seem to be scoring a particular success here this season, and they are reacting to it most becomingly. I have been listening to them enthusiastically for many years, and it strikes me that they have never been better. Certainly I never heard the lovely "Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes" sung more effectively than it was by Leonard Osborn.

The Book

Although it is the brilliant and almost incredibly tuneful score that is the overwhelming feature of "The Gondoliers," I don't mean to scorn the book and lyrics in any way. The story of the two young men, either of whom may be the missing King of Barataria, has its duller moments, and I find myself eventually getting a little tired of Gilbert's continual distrust of nursemaids, but there is a great deal of delightful satire in the narrative. And there is, I think, something oddly engaging about the good-natured Tory humor.

Somehow I never get over my pleasure at recalling that one of the songs in "The Gondoliers," the number concerning the Duke of Plaza-Toro, supplied the tune for a ribald song of my youth about Christopher Colombo, just as I am always entertained at being reminded that an air in "The Pirates of Penzance" provided the tune for "Hail! Hail! The Gang's All Here!" And mention of the Duke of Plaza-Toro, of course, brings up the name of Martyn Green, whose role it is. It isn't one of his largest parts, but he is naturally perfection in it.

Richard Watson

By now Mr. Green has become a New York institution, and last night he was heralded upon every appearance. But this time the more important character of the evening belongs to Richard Watson, who plays the awesome Grand Inquisitor. It is time to recognize that this rotund Mr. Watson is himself a Gilbertian comic of distinction. He can play the unctuous roles with splendid relish, and he is one of the joys of "The Gondoliers." Incidentally, in my enthusiasm, I even thought that a couple of good-looking girls had managed to sneak into the chorus.

I happened to be a little annoyed at the D'Oyly Carte Company this week, because they are offering my favorite Gilbert and Sullivan work, "Iolanthe," on a night when I will have to be about my patrolling duties elsewhere.

"THE GONDOLIERS"

Operetta by W. S. Gilbert, with music by Arthur Sullivan; presented by the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company at the St. James Theatre, February 12, 1951. The cast:

Duke of Plaza-Toro.....Martyn Green
Luiz.....Henry Goodier
Don Alhambra Del Bolero...Richard Watson
Marco Palmieri.....Leonard Osborn
Giuseppe Palmieri...Alan Styler
Antonio.....Peter Pratt
Francesco....Thomas Hancock
Giorgio.....Radley Flynn
Annibale.....Stanley Youngman
Duchess of Plaza-Toro....Ella Halman
Casilda.....Margaret Mitchell
Gianetta.....Muriel Harding
Tessa.....Joan Gillingham
Fiametta.....Enid Walsh
Vittoria.....Ceinwen Jones
Guilia.....Joyce Wright
Inez.....Caryl Fane

Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that I found the visitors in splendid form in "The Gondoliers." There are a few moments in the first act when the going is just a trifle slow, but the Sullivan music is wonderful throughout, and the second act is sheer enchantment.

The New York Times

February 13, 1951

D'Oyly Carte Opera Company Sings 'The Gondoliers' at the St. James Theatre

By BROOKS ATKINSON

According to the classical principles of journalism, there is no news this morning about the D'Oyly Carte Company. Their production of "The Gondoliers," which went on at the St. James last evening, is perfect. If Martyn Green blew up in his lines occasionally or Isidore Godfrey led the wrong overture there might be a bit of news to publish about these mettlesome minstrels from England. This column, which dwells in a dreamland of impossible perfection, could complain that the chorus still swallows Gilbert's salty lyrics with more relish than the occasion warrants. They must have a lot of fine, eupeptic lyrics in their stomachs by this time.

* * *

But there is no point in tediously picking at so polished a musical organization. For their "Gondoliers" is full of an impeccably mocking spirit and it is sung with loveliness. After a fortnight under Mr. Godfrey's direction, the orchestra is now at concert pitch and conveys easily the cheerful, dainty grace of the score. "The Gondoliers" may not be Gilbert's happiest inspiration, since he had already been through the formula successfully so many times. If his satire on egalitarianism seemed exhilarating when he first made it in 1889, it is on the testy side today.

* * *

But Sullivan, who was just about ready to write his serious opera, was in his most exultant musical mood. "The Gondoliers" overflows with the dances, melodies and madrigals of a man who was in love with his profession. Since the D'Oyly Carte people respect the treasure they have been guarding all these years, they are not letting any of Sullivan's golden pieces slip through their fingers. Leonard Osborn and Alan Styler as the two gondoliers and Muriel Harding and Joan Gillingham as the merry maidens they love, sing all the music set down for these parts with a light touch, sweet tone and enchanting manner.

* * *

As "The Gondoliers" was written, the secondary singers carry as much if not more of the burden than the grandees who lead the company. But the bigwigs put Gilbert's architecture of humor into the production. You would hardly expect Mr. Green to be less than perfect as the supercilious Duke of Plaza-Toro—all style and little substance; and you would be entirely right. But don't forget that Richard Watson's grand inquisitor is also off the top shelf in the Gilbert cupboard. He sings in a liquid bass voice of wonderful volume, and he acts with a gleam of cultivated malice that keeps the part buoyant and comic. Singing is no chore for either of these gay-hearted gentlemen.

* * *

Ella Halman is admirable as the pompous Duchess and Margaret Mitchell is radiant as her bewildered daughter. Since the costumes and settings for "The Mikado" are so dreary in a perfectly respectable way, it may be worth while to point out that the settings for "The Gondoliers" are agreeable, and the costumes are ravishingly beautiful.

Life being so hard-pressed today, they can play "The Gondoliers" only tonight and twice tomorrow. On Thursday, they move on to Iolanthe." In the meantime, there is no news about "The Gondoliers." It is perfect, that's all.

New York Herald Tribune

February 13, 1951

D'Oyly Carte Revival at the St. James Theater

By Bert McCord

Watching the d'Oyly Carte Opera Company run blithely through "The Gondoliers" at the St. James last night made at least one reviewer wonder why there exists such a term as Savoyards and why it should be an exclusive aggregation. Surely this fun and frolic is no acquired taste, so it must be the simple lethary of human nature against anything which has picked up any trace of that awesome word, "classic."

Though it is generally considered one of the lesser accomplishments of Gilbert and Sullivan, "The Gondoliers" has comic situations that, by comparison, put some of the $7.20 Broadway musicals to shame; lyrics that surpass in ingenuity any show in town, including the redoubtable "Guys and Dolls," and melodies that refuse to show the signs of wear and tear that restrict many a current juke-box favorite to a life-span of three months.

It is true that the plot of mistaken identity, which finds three girls married to two men, and is resolved by the disclosure that a nurse had substituted her own son for the young heir to the throne of Barataria, wears thin in spots. And the satire on the gondoliers' aristocracy in which "any one is somebody" may not be exactly topical. But, taken as a whole, this compilation of witty words and tuneful songs is beguiling entertainment.

Martyn Green, the spark-plug of the company, is as dynamic as ever as the importunate Duke of Plaza-Toro and it must be admitted that his presence is missed throughout the middle stretches of the show. Nor would the evening be complete without the droll footwork in which he indulges in the gavotte near the finale. Richard Watson, as the stately Don Alhambra, runs him a close second in authority and the enunciation of Gilbert's lyrics. Ella Halman is fine as the duchess who "tamed the insignificant progenitor, "while her daughter, Casilda, played by Margaret Mitchell, is not only good vocally, but exceptionally pleasing to behold. Joan Gillingham and Enid Walsh are effective as the contadine, the latter doing with her voice what the former accomplishes with features and personality.

The singing chorus is strong vocally, but to this ear the lyrics were hard to follow, except in the better known ballads. The fact that they are several cuts above the usual ensemble rendering Gilbert and Sullivan should not contribute to any let-down in the quality of their work. As for the scenery, the first act setting in Venice is ample evidence of the fact that the company labors lucratively the year-round, but it will no doubt be replaced before long. The Palace of Barataria is fine.

Journal American

February 13, 1951

The Cast and Opera Are Nearly Perfect

By JOHN McCLAIN

Well, the D'Oyly Carte Company last night presented another in their current series of Gilbert and Sullivan operas, this time "The Gondoliers," and I have just about run out of adjectives.

For this is an expert company throughout and it is rather a late date for me or anybody else to begin criticizing the two great Britian craftsmen who supplied the words and music. You like their stuff or you don't. If you like it, which is more apt to be the case than not, you could hardly wish to see it in better hands.

"Gondoliers" does not happen to be my favorite G. & S. mostly because the music is less familiar than some of the others, or maybe it's just that they didn't play it as much around the house when I was a kid as they did "Pinafore" and "Mikado."

Even so, it has the same slight but utterly charming plot and the persons performing have the pleasant facility of singing so you can understand the lyrics.

Everybody's Happy

There is always a case of mistaken identity in these operations and in this instance it concerns two gondoliers, both recently married, who suddenly are told that one of them is about to become King of Barataria, due to a secret pledge made by the King's foster-mother.

This is resolved very pleasantly for a time by having both brothers ascend the throne, but naturally in the end it turns out that neither of them belong there since the old lady crossed everybody and switched babies years ago.

The real king is the attendant of the Duke of Plaza-Toro, who has been in love with his daughter, Casilda, all along. He puts on the crown and the two lads return to their wives and everybody lives happily ever after in Gilbert and Sullivan land.

As usual Martyn Green turns in a hilarious performance as the Duke of Plaza-Toro and I thought Margaret Mitchell, as Casilda, was extremely fetching.

Others prominently active in this production were Henry Goodier, Richard Watson, Leonard Osborn, Alan Styler, Muriel Harding and Joan Gillingham.

There's no use telling you to go and see all this because you've probably made up your mind long hence. And if you haven't you probably won't be able to get in anyway.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 13, 1951

Standees Welcome 'Gondoliers' Opening

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The Gilbert and Sullivanites were out in full and festive force last night for this year's premiere of "The Gondoliers" by the D'Oyly Carte Company.

The audience even occupied standing room and it demanded and got consistent encores of the lovely score. It is only the rare word that is spoken without music in this work and although the tunes are not overly familiar, they are probably Sir Arthur Sullivan's most winning collection.

Gilbert's book is a typically complex affair of mistaken identity and interrupted love affairs. In fact, this particular narrative is basically the same one out of which Verdi made one of his gloomiest and most bosom-clutching grand operas. Here it is light and gay as a Valentine.

Prince Involved.

It seems that the Duke's daughter is in love with a likely drummer who rat-a-plans for her father. But in babyhood she was wed to a Prince who afterwards disappeared.

The supposed Prince was brought up as the adopted son of a gondolier, who irretrievably mixed him up with his own son, before dying. The two young gondoliers discover that one of them is a Prince, just after they have been married.

Plenty of Satire.

The complications and resultant solutions are more than enough to result in a rich series of songs, as well as a wealth of sly comment on indigent titleholders.

A great deal of the conversation about politics, and aristocratic rackets, is remarkably timeless, and just as funny today as it was when the opera was written.

The show is brightly costumed, and half of it is done against a brilliant hanging of a watery Venetian scene which looks like that most classic of all jigsaw puzzles. The second act is an elegant throne room.

Martyn Green Tops.

As one comes to expect, Martyn Green is the most conspicuous performer, chirpy and sprightly, always a gay, deft dancer and master of the classic comedy tricks.

Margaret Mitchell is his pretty daughter and Ella Halman his forbidding wife. Muriel Harding and Joan Gillingham are equally comely and tuneful as the brides of the gondoliers, sung and played gallantly by Leonard Osborn and Alan Styler.

Richard Watson is particularly effective as a reactionary Inquisitor, and Caryl Fane is handsome as the missing nurse who both caused the mischief and unravels it.

"Billy Budd"

New York Herald Tribune

February 12, 1951

By Bert McCord

Not Foo Seaworthy

"Billy Budd," Herman Melville's story about men at sea aboard a British ship of the line in 1798, has been brought to the stage in a dramatization by Louis O. Coxe and Robert Chapman which opened Saturday night at the Biltmore Theater. The story involving the naive young foretopman, who recognizes no evil, and the cruel master-at-arms, who will tolerate no goodness, has moments of sharp dramatic incandescence, but the light dims dangerously low in a metaphysical and anti-climactic third act.

While the opening scenes of "Billy Budd" establish the characters and set the mood effectively enough, the authors take too long to put the conflict into focus. And the long resolution, after the conflict is finally pointed up, is too muddled to be cogent. When the stammering Budd has risen in speechless indignation to strike down the evil Jimmy Legs who sought to frame him as a mutineer, the play settles into a discussion. Recognizing his innocence, the martial court wants to acquit him, but is led by the captain into condemning the youth to hang by the yardarm, because on ships of the line in war time there can be no justice, only law and authority. The argument is too diffused and the language too confused to create or even maintain any suspense.

Dennis King is excellent in the role of the captain, who is both aware and understanding, but who realizes that an officer in the British navy has no rights, only duties. His keen stage presence shows at every turn and each time he comes from his cabin onto the deck of the H. M. S. Indomitable, the scene grows more vibrant. It is his acting which saves the scene in which the fatal blow is struck—a scene which should have had great dramatic impact. And it is his acting in the tribunal scene, when he beseeches one of his officers to find a way out or accept the inevitable, that keeps it as absorbing as it is.

Charles Nolte, as Billy, and Torin Thatcher, as Jimmy Legs, appeared to be following direction, but it is a direction that defeats them, as well as the play. Norris Houghton, who staged the production, has interpreted it in terms of black and white, which encourages disbelief, as Billy emerges a little angel and Jimmy Legs becomes evil incarnate. More shading and subtlety in the direction of the first two acts and more clarity in the writing of the third would have lent added credibility and created a dramatic tension.

The all-male cast is generally capable, with Jack Manning turning in a good portrayal of a popinjay on his first "cruise." George Fells, Bernard Kates and Preston Hanson should also be singled out. Paul Morrison's settings are atmospheric and effective.

"BILLY BUDD"

Play by Louis O. Coxe and Robert Chapman, based on the novel by Herman Melville; staged by Norris Houghton; settings by Paul Morrison; costumes by Ruth Morley; presented by Chandler Cowles and Anthony B. Farrell at the Biltmore Theatre, February 10, 1951. The cast:

Jenkins.....Jeff Morrow
The Dansker.....George Fells
Jackson.....Bertram Tanswell
John Claggart...Torin Thatcher
Talbot.....James Daly
Butler.....Leonard Yorr
Kincaid.....Kenneth Paine
Payne.....Judson Pratt
O'Daniel.....Walter Burke
Messboy.....Charles Hudson
Squeak.....Bernard Kates
Duncan.....Robert McQueeney
Surgeon.....Winston Ross
Gardiner.....Jack Manning
Billy Budd.....Charles Nolte
Edward Fairfax Vere.....Dennis King
Hallam.....Lee Marvin
Rea.....Henry Garrard
Philip Michael Seymour...Guy Spaull
John Ratcliffe..Preston Hanson
Bordman Wyatt.....Norman Ettlinger
Stoll.....Charles Carshon
Byren.....Martin Brandt
Drummer.....David Long
Sailor.....Robert Dudley
2d Marine.....Bill Froelich

Synopsis: The entire action of the play takes place aboard H.M.S. Indomitable at sea. August, 1798, the year following the Naval Mutinies at Spithead and the Nore. Act I. Scene 1. Crew's quarters. Noon. Scene 2. Main deck. Sunset. Scene 3. The same. Several nights later. Act II. Scene 1. Main deck. The following morning. Scene 2. The same. Night. Scene 3. The same. Two hours later. Act III. Scene 1. Captain's cabin. Later the same night. Scene 2. The same. 4 a. m. Scene 3. Main deck. Sunrise.

The New York Times

February 12, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Nobody bothered to publish Herman Melville's grim story of "Billy Budd" until thirty years after his death. It was easy to evade the malign implications of the sea yarn by stuffing it into a pigeonhole. But it is going to be hard to avoid thinking about it now. For Louis O. Coxe and Robert Chapman have made a horrifyingly candid drama out of it, still called "Billy Budd," which opened in a superb performance at the Biltmore on Saturday evening.

Although it has the color, savor and turbulence of a sea story, its romanticism is perverse. It is set on board H. M. S. Indomitable at sea in 1798 and it brings to life the rude and brawling ways of men on shipboard. But the brooding author of "Moby Dick" was really interested in the wild life of man that underlies the little ceremonies we take part in as members of society. "Billy Budd" sternly dramatizes the basic problem of good and evil.

* * *

Billy Budd is a handsome, guileless, pure-minded sailor who is impressed into His Majesty's service in wartime. To the author of "Billy Budd" he represents good. The master-at-arms is a malevolent sadist who hates life and represents evil. He cannot let the good triumph without abandoning the whole philosophy of evil that he has developed over the years. He sets out to destroy Billy to preserve his own ego. In the process, Billy strikes him and accidentally kills him.

According to the laws of the Navy, he is guilty of murdering a superior officer and must be hanged. This is where the almost unbearable drama comes in. To everyone on board ship, Billy is innocent of the intent of murder. He is rather the victim of the master-at-arms' scheme to destroy him. Even the ship's court revolts at the necessity of carrying out so monstrous a sentence. But they have no discretion. Cause hurries on to the most devastating effect in the code of man-made discipline. Good and evil destroy each other, for neither one has made the human compromise that makes social life possible.

* * *

Mr. Coxe and Mr. Chapman have written an extraordinarily skillful play that begins casually enough below decks with the gossip and grumbling of the crew. But gradually it moves out of familiar things into the tension of a moral problem that tightens the whole ship and challenges the universe. The fateful reasoning in the last act is hard to follow, it wrestles with so many abstract ideas and upsets so thoroughly most human assumptions.

But there is a strong mind burrowing into Billy Budd's awful fate—a sympathetic mind that has no faith in men and is even skeptical of the goodness of God. By the time Melville wrote this story he had been broiled in hellfire. He could have cited chapter and verse to account for his pessimism, for "Billy Budd" is founded on an incident in the American Navy of the nineteenth century.

Thanks to Norris Houghton, "Billy Budd" has been staged with taste, style and integrity. Paul Morrison has designed some imposing shipboard scenery, and Ruth Morley has dressed the officers and the men in interesting costumes. Dennis King plays the captain with intellectual alertness and authority, and also with decent compassion in the concluding scenes.

* * *

As the master-at-arms, Torin Thatcher plays with a combination of neatness and cold fury—the devil's advocate incarnate. Against the touching gentleness of Charles Nolte's Billy Budd, Mr. Thatcher's evil intelligence is painfully vivid. Mr. Nolte expresses Billy's artlessness without letting him ever become mawkish or cloying.

There are excellent performances by Jack Manning as a comically supercilious midshipman, Jeff Morrow as a belligerent sailor, Bernard Kates as a treacherous pierhead jumper, Guy Spaull as the first officer, and many others in a long cast. On the surface "Billy Budd" is as picturesque as "Mister Roberts." But after the scene is set a mind takes possession of it and proceeds to knock against some of the most tormenting problems of the universe. "Billy Budd" has size and depth as well as color and excitement.

Journal American

February 12, 1951

Well Put Together, But Not Convincing

By John McClain

Sorry, but I didn't particularly care for "Billy Budd," the adaptation of the Herman Melville novel which was presented at the Biltmore Theatre Saturday night.

Dennis King, the star, and Torin Thatcher, the heavy, delivered strong and workmanlike performances in the top roles as did most of the rest of the all-male cast, but the gyrations which occurred aboard H.M.S. Indomitable in the year 1798 left me less than elated.

Billy Budd, a seaman played by Charles Nolte, joins the Indomitable while that ship is engaged in warfare against the French. Things are touchy because there has been a general mutiny in the British fleet only a year before and young Billy is required almost immediately to establish his courage and integrity to the satisfaction of the crew. But there is one meanie, Torin Thatcher, the master-at-arms of the vessel, who will have none of him.

To hell with his bravery and good fellowship, Mr. Thatcher says, I am going to see that he gets into trouble.

* * *

Tries Frame Up

Well, he tries to frame him in front of the captain (Dennis King), saying that Budd had been trying to steam up a mutiny. As a result the kid, who unfortunately stutters and cannot find proper words for rebuttal, belts Thatcher over the head and kills him.

The third act is concerned with the Court Martial at sea and the grave problem of what to do under British Naval law. All hands, including the captain, are agreed that Budd was entirely justified but there is no excuse for a seaman striking a superior and since he killed the only penalty is death.

As a result there is an interminably talky scene in which the captain prevails upon the court to forget their sentiments and hand down the only decision demanded of officers of the ship. The boy must pay.

This makes the captain appear an impossible bounder but Billy Budd gets him off the hook with a final speech to the effect that he is happy to die for the principal of the thing.

I started disbelieving the whole premise early in the play. I didn't believe anybody could be such an unmitigated ocean-going louse as Thatcher and on the other hand I was bored with golden-boy Billy Budd's staunch preoccupation with holiness.

* * *

All through the proceedings he is constantly refusing to squeal, taking small raps for deeds he didn't commit and coming to the aid of his worst enemy. Then, as a reward, he is told he has been sentenced to death. I think at that point he could have been pardoned for saying, "Hey, wait a minute!"

Nolte, who plays Billy Budd, has wavy-blonde hair and a "Mr. America" physique, and will probably be under contract to Sam Goldwyn before these immortal words stain your fingers.

He is a perfectly capable actor, but too pretty and unerring for me. I think the play would have been enhanced greatly had he been, both in looks and action, more ugly and earthy.

The whole thing was admirably put together, well directed and set, but only casually convincing at best.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

February 12, 1951

'Billy Budd' A Stark, Powerful Parable

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Drama.
Subject—Duty.
I Find It—Powerful.

There is an unusual impressive sort of theater to be found in the week end's new offering, "Billy Budd." The play is taken from a novel of Herman Melville, and its action occurs aboard a British naval vessel in 1798.

The work is a striking parable about the existence of right and wrong in humans. Its harsh content and its presentation are pared to the bone, so that the issue are starkly simple. The severe plainness of the play is so unusual that it often seems elusive. Actually, the intangible questions of right and wrong are offered on a basis where the final judgment must be contributed by the onlooker.

Symbol of Goodness.

Billy Budd is a living symbol of innocence and hence complete goodness. A young sailor of no education and less pretension, he is incapable of finding evil in other men.

He is impressed in wartime aboard a ship of the line, whose Master at Arms is as clear a depiction of badness as the boy is of good.

At the moment chosen by the author in which to tell his tale, war has made naval rule particularly arbitrary. The service is highly sensitive about mutiny because of recent outbreaks.

Kills In Rage.

The older man forms a plan to destroy Budd, which comes to quicker solution than he planned.

Falsely implicating Billy in mutinous designs, he is forced by the Captain to confront the boy with his false accusations. Billy is so shocked by this intentional evil that an impediment in his speech keeps him from replying. In a burst of rage, he strikes his accuser who falls dead.

No one on the ship has any pity for the fate of the Master. All agree that Billy was more than justified. Yet the fact remains that he has struck and killed a superior officer. The Court Martial must decide in terms of its duty, not as men.

Simple and Clear.

The play has an inevitable clarity about its progress that is most impressive. There is never a word but bears on the main theme. The acting is as clear and simple as the text, and the direction sustains the intellectual force of the argument with remarkable aptness.

Dennis King is starred as the Captain who must sit in judgment, and defies his own nature to favor a higher morality. It is a cool, gentle performance, eminently successful in sustaining the mood of a struggle in the mind or the soul rather than the heart.

Charles Nolte is utterly right looking as the pure young sailor. Blond and husky, he performs with all the openness the role must have.

Torin Thatcher plays the evil Master at Arms with complete blandness. He never questions the murkiness of his own mind.

This is an absorbing work, with its share of wry humor, and is unquestionably memorable theater.

DAILY NEWS

February 12, 1951

'Billy Budd' a Seagoing Mixture Of Good Drama, Cold Philosophy

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Billy Budd," which Chandler Cowles and Anthony B. Farrell presented at the Biltmore Theatre Saturday evening, is a tragic "H. M. S. Pinafore," and I do not wonder that Benjamin Britten is at work making it into an opera. Billy, like Rafe Rackstraw, is a lowly sailor on one of His Majesty's ships of the line, and he must not rise above his station. He must, indeed, scramble up the rigging and hang himself from a yardarm for killing a superior officer who most heartily deserved being slain.

"Billy Budd" has been adapted from a Herman Melville novel by Louis O. Coxe and Robert Chapman. It was presented here two years ago by ANTA's Experimental Theatre under another title. The present production is a sumptuous one, with a large, colorfully costumed company of good actors and some stunning settings by Paul Morrison. The players, Mr. Morrison and the costumer, Ruth Morley, work masterfully to take an audience aboard H. M. S. Indomitable in August of 1796.

Starts Promisingly.

The playwrights have contrived a lusty and promising first act as they outline the characters and hint at the troubles and fierce enmities to be found aboard a man-o'-war. But in the following acts excitement flares only fitfully as "Billy Budd" becomes a moralistic discussion of the impersonality of justice and the even more awesome and inhuman personality of duty. The drama has split itself in two, and neither half is entirely satisfying.

Billy Budd is a huge and excessively handsome young man who, although he has been at sea in merchantmen all his life, is an innocent. When he is pressed into service aboard the Indomitable his qualities as a sailor quickly advance him to the post of a maintopman; but his qualities as a human being are excessively irritating to some of those aboard.

Billy is open, frank and friendly and believes all others are the same. He even accepts as open, frank and friendly the master-at-arms, who is as cunning and sadistic a rascal as ever flogged a sailor. Billy quickly finds favor with the higher ship's officers and with the captain himself. Capt. Edward Fairfax Vere is remarkably like Capt. Corcoran of the Pinafore, to the extent of hardly ever using a big, big D and insisting that junior officers be polite to the crew. (Melville wrote "Billy Budd" in 1891; "Pinafore" was first produced here in 1879.)

The master-at-arms resents Billy's friendliness and his deserved success with the officers. In the presence of the captain he accuses Billy of fomenting mutiny—a charge so preposterous that the young man, who stammers under any stress whatever, is literally speechless. Since he has to do something to deny his guilt, he strikes his accuser and the blow is fatal.

So now comes Billy's trial before three officers, with the captain as the witness. The three judges are convinced the lad is innocent and was justified in hitting his accuser. They would let him go—and so would Capt. Vere . . . as a witness. But as a captain, Vere cannot let him go. He argues that he and his fellow officers are not men, but instruments of duty; their ship is not a living thing, manned by men, but merely a weapon in His Majesty's service. They must be inhuman in performing their duty, and their duty is clearly to condemn a sailor for killing a superior officer.

First-Rate Cast.

The cast of "Billy Budd" is splendid throughout. As the captain, Dennis King is even more effective than he was as Gen. Burgoyne in Shaw's "Devil's Disciple." Charles Nolte is remarkably well fitted, physically, to the role of Billy, and his acting is admirable. Torin Thatcher is the impersonation of evil as the master-at-arms, and there are some excellent character bits by George Fells, Jeff Morrow, Jack Manning and others.

The drama has been well staged by Norris Houghton. There is a great amount of good theatre in it, but its two elements of melodramatic narrative and philosophical contemplation seem to defeat, rather than to help, each other. When, at last, Billy Budd breathed a fervent "God bless Capt. Vere" and scrambled up the rigging to become his own executioner, I should have been emotionally enthralled. Instead, I thought Billy was silly.